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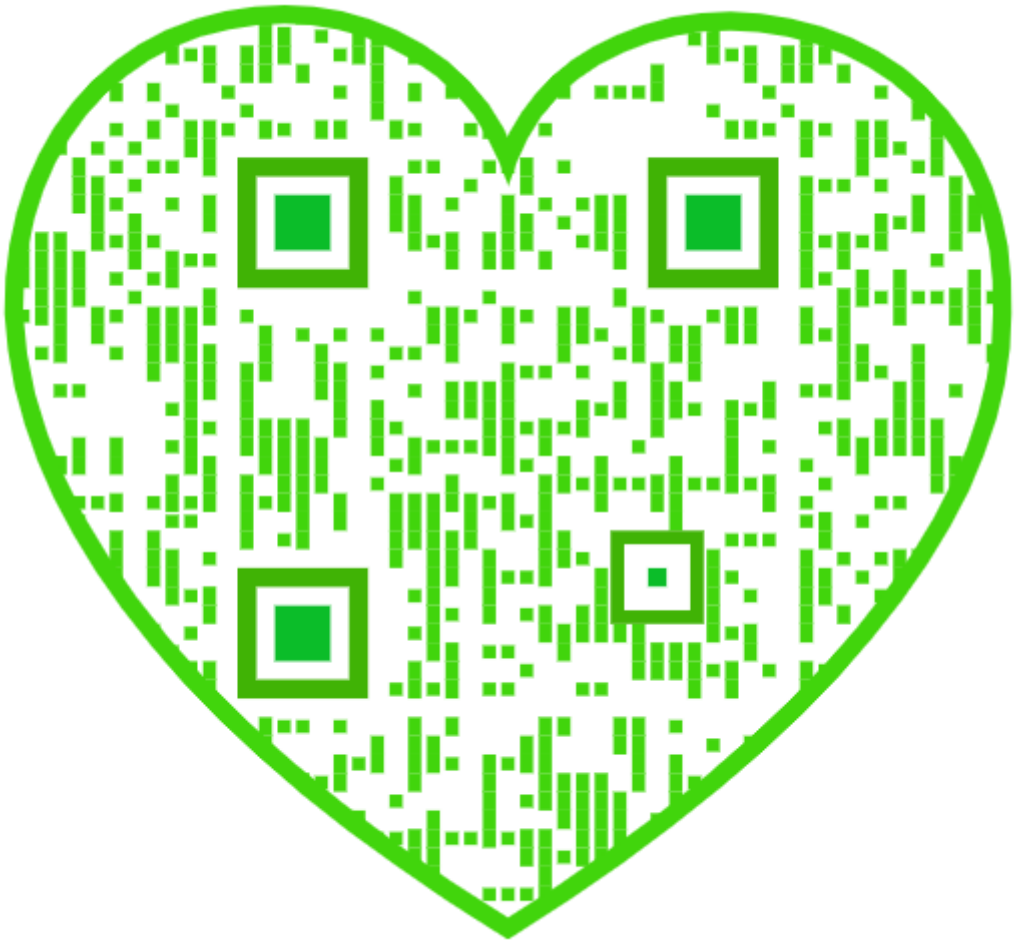

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The
GREENLEAF : THEATRE

The Curious Herbal

BY

CONSTANCE SMEDLEY

1 –

SECOND EDITION

THE CURIOUS HERBAL

" Curiosity tempts us
To fly to the tree,
But nothing exempts us
From civil-it-ee."

GREENLEAF THEATRE PLAYS

THE

Curious Herbal

BY

CONSTANCE SMEDLEY

Telling of Mrs. Elizabeth Blackwell's visit to the Old Chelsea Herb Garden in 1732.

ONE SHILLING NET

From all Booksellers, and the Publishers, Duckworth and Co., 3, Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London, W.C. 2.

SEPTEMBER, 1922

THE

Curious Herbal.

°°°

TWO PROLOGUES—either or both may be used.

We are now about to present a play in verse, THE CURIOUS HERBAL, by Constance Smedley.

ONE.

The Curious Herbal is the title of a book containing a series of colored plates of herbs and trees, published in 1735 or thereabouts, the illustrations by Mrs. Elizabeth Blackwell with descriptions by her husband, Alexander Blackwell. It can still be seen in the British Museum, London, and is one of the first published achievements of a woman artist. The hand-colored plates are said to be most beautiful and accurate.

Mrs. Blackwell is not known to fame because immediately after her book appeared, (and the preface shews how grievous an impropriety she considered her appearance in public life as an artist), she retired into domestic seclusion and was never heard of again. Mr. Philip Miller, known in his day as the Prince of Gardeners, was an equally remark-

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able character. His famous Dictionary of Gardening was the first horticultural treatise published which did not attach occult superstitions to plants and herbs. He reigned over the Chelsea Herb Garden, which is now as it was then, the property of the Society of Apothecaries. Amongst its quiet lawns, winding walks and orderly beds of plants and herbs, this play was written.

We have founded our production on a piece of the famous old Chelsea China, wherein gay little figures group round a hawthorn tree in exuberant blossom. The further to promote the spirit of those times, we beg your indulgence for a rhyming prologue after the fashion of the stage in 1732.

TWO.

Gentle friends for your content
We would now a play present,
THE CURIOUS HERBAL is its name
Which is the title of a book
Wherein, at pictured herbs you look
And read descriptions of the same.

And Chelsea Herb Garden's the place
Which Mr. Miller once did grace,
The leading gardener of his day;
Trees he imported from afar
Most precious and most singular.
As for the manner of the play,

The author saw a china group
Where a small lady in a hoop

Two stern professors did beguile;
It stood on a museum shelf
Twixt mandarins and jugs of delf
And was so gay it made you smile.

Behind the lady was a tree
As green and flowery as could be.
This china group we now will show.
The tale is true, Mrs. Blackwell
Her piteous story once did tell
Where hawthorn trees in Chelsea blow.

So gentles, now for other days
When no female her eyes did raise
Without good cause, and spent her time
O'er kitchen fire or at her glass
Or with her needle, hours did pass—
As simple as the author's rhyme.

CHARACTERS:

Dr. Isaac Rand
Mrs. Elizabeth Blackwell
Mr. Philip Miller

SCENE:

The Old Chelsea Herb Garden, 1732.

Against a heavy velvet curtain stands something very much like a china ornament. On a raised base of white and gold is a miniature mound of turf from which springs a luxuriant hawthorn tree spreading to either side of the mound, and laden with pinky white blossoms.

Before the tree, is a gilt seat with a high back, accommodating two at a close pinch.

There is room for promenading a few paces up and down on two miniature platforms between the seat and the border of sober-colored herbs which springs from the turf. The high-backed seat and luxuriant tree form a substantial back, from which at this moment come two figures, obviously china.

The gentleman is clad in the straight black robe of a doctor of Science, relieved by spotless white bands at his throat. His face, though severe of feature, is smooth and pink, his three-cornered black hat tops immaculate white curls, he carries an ivory cane with a scarlet tassel slung round his wrist, and a small fat book.

On his arm is a lady in prodigious flowered skirts, white, pink, mauve and blue, a gilt-laced corsage from which depends a tiny mauve apron, matching the mauve fichu round her white shoulders, and a lemon straw hat caught beneath her chin with a narrow black velvet ribbon. Beneath the wide straw hat a close-fitting white cap with an infinitesimal ruffle, emphasises the blandness of her doll-like face with its rosy button of a mouth, moonish brows, and bright pink cheeks.

She carries a large portfolio, whose scarlet corners match the heels of her buckled shoes. They come round the tree, at the right side, pacing regularly in step, and pause before they reach the seat.

DOCTOR RAND

Here madam, I must ask release
For here your journeyings must cease.

She places portfolio obediently on seat, folds her hands and listens. He points with his cane to the right.

Beyond us the Glasshouses are,
Where Drunken Date and Great Macaw,
The Cabbage Tree and Tamarind,
Yuccas and Balsam you may find.
The Wood of Life, the Banyan Tree
And many a curiosity.
But these are Mister Miller's pride,
Mine are the physick herbs outside,
Here you will find them, Basil, Rue,
Potherbs aplenty, sweet ones too.

MRS. BLACKWELL

(*putting her hands together sweetly*)

Good Doctor Rand, I'm in a flutter
To see these Trees whose names you utter.
My forehead puckers.
What are Yuccas?
And cabbages
On Trees? (*archly*) You quiz!
The Banyan Tree?
What *can* that be?
Dear Doctor, I must sweetly tease
To see such curiosities.

DOCTOR RAND

Madam, such things are not for you
Who are a woman.

MRS BLACKWELL

(*sighing and drooping*)

Ah, too true!

DOCTOR RAND

Your plan to make a herbal book
My fancy and approval took.
With potherbs women are concerned
And so 'tis well their names be learned
For potherbs, indiscreetly mixed!

(*He holds up his hand in horror.*)

MRS. BLACKWELL

Oh sir, my gaze beyond is fixed
Where, underneath those glittering panes,
The learned Mr. Miller reigns,
Like Solomon, among his trees,
And several curiosities!

DOCTOR RAND

Miller as Solomon is wise,
But turns on women no such eyes.
No Sheba, though she were a Queen,
With Mister Miller would be seen.
He is a stern and stately man
And women doth severely ban.

Mrs. Blackwell is visibly affected, even to delicate tears, during this harangue, but returns to her pleading, hands clasped on breast.

MRS. BLACKWELL

Dear sir, I beg you let me pass
To see inside that house of glass!
No more can I contented be
Until I've seen that Banyan tree
And if its picture I can take
Oh what a stir abroad 'twill make!

DOCTOR RAND

But Mister Miller never would
Allow a Female to intrude
And picture with her unskilled brush
His precious trees!

MRS. BLACKWELL

with startled approach

Unskilled, sir?

DOCTOR RAND

Hush!
Madam, SO great a man is he
That when he wrote his dictionary,
The learned Sage, Boerha-vë penned
A letter, calling him Dear Friend!

MRS. BLACKWELL.

vainly trying to give some information.

Boerha-vë, Sir?

DOCTOR RAND

producing watch from fob.

The hour grows late.

MRS. BLACKWELL.

Kind Doctor Rand, pray let me state . . .

She places her hand entreatingly on his arm; he retires promptly, holding up his cane, like an angel with a flaming sword.

DOCTOR RAND.

The hawthorn is rugged,
The hawthorn is stout,
The trails of the bindweed
Go winding about.
The thorns tear the tendrils,
The thorns press them down:
Convolvulus never
The hawthorn shall crown!

He pantomimes with cane.

So madam, in Science
The man stands alone.
No wiles of a woman
Shall conquer his throne.
He beats down her fingers
That pick and that pry
And guardeth his treasure
From feminine eye.

She approaches him pleading, her delicate fingers on his arm: he draws away, using cane.

The apprentices wait.
I bid you adoo!—(*adieu*)
I shall not be late
In returning for you.
I trust you to stay here

This side of the tree,
Or the great Mister Miller
Enra-ged will be!

He bows and she curtseys in strict time to rhythm as he passes behind her and she revolves to centre.

Mrs. Blackwell remains centre, prostrate in a low curtsey, facing audience piteously.

MRS. BLACKWELL.

Now why should a great man be furious
Because a little woman's curious?

All men are curious to see
The things that rare and novel be.

Their curiosity demands
The trees be brought from foreign lands!

Then gentlemen like Mister Miller
Write books on them, and gain much siller.

Some coloured pictures I must make
To sell for my dear husband's sake,

Of money I have such great need,
My Curious Herbal MUST succeed.

Around the left side of the trees comes a stately gent'eman, portly but also very pink and white. He is clad in deep orange stockings with gilt clocks, tawny breeches, a lavender full-skirted coat with the crinkled crepy surface so often seen in Chelsea china, a ruffle of white

beneath an enormous black silk bow, and black cocked hat over his own straight reddish hair which falls to his shoulders. He carries a gilt trowel in one hand, and in the other, a gaudy azure blossom, newly picked from his famous Glasshouse. This is Mister Philip Miller, Curator of the Chelsea Herbgarden, and Author of the Gardening Dictionary, a monumental work which has brought him world distinction.
He surveys the kneeling figure, for Mrs. Blackwell has promptly curtseyed to the ground.

MISTER MILLER

And who is this that sayeth MUST?
A worm that wriggles in the dust?

MRS. BLACKWELL

Nay sir for worms are well content
Their lives in darkness should be spent.

They wriggle to the light in vain,
See nothing, and descend again,

But I strain upward to the light,
Where Mister Miller reigns in might,

And ask to see, upon my knees,
His famous curiosities!

MISTER MILLER

No women in my garden come.
The woman's province is her home.

MRS. BLACKWELL

Still supinely kneeling, her hands clasped, her mild eyes looking up appealingly.

I have no home, sir!

MISTER MILLER

Find one then.

Turning from her and surveying audience with curling lip.

There are a-plenty foolish men.

MRS. BLACKWELL

Grateful for any words from the August Personage before her.

A plenty sir, and so few wise!
Yet wisdom only gratifies.
To happiness there is one path,
The one that Mister Miller hath.
I care not how he stands and glowers.
I ask to tread his path of flowers.

MISTER MILLER

You are persistent!

MRS. BLACKWELL

(*persuasive, still kneeling, but letting her hands drop sweetly over her full skirts*).

Very, sir,
Until this favour you confer.
A modest artist here you see,
Who has alas, no botany,
Yet seeks to make a Herbal Book
Wherein the curious may look.

MISTER MILLER

What object could inspire your brush
Better than yonder hawthorn bush?

At this cruel remark, Mrs. Blackwell starts to her feet, rolling her eyes with deep reproach.

MRS. BLACKWELL

A common hawthorn! Mister Miller!
No-one to see that will pay siller.
Kind Mister Miller, let me come
To see the Banyan in its home!
Its very name the mind doth please
Awakening savage images.
Apes and baboons do swinging go
Where banyans bend their branches low,
And hummingbird cerulean, shoots
Beneath the arches of its roots.
I see wild sights, I hear wild sounds,
There is a Banyan in these grounds!
Like raging tigress I must pace
Until I reach its precious place!

She has turned away from Miller, now she reverses her pacing and bears down on his surprised majesty.
He checks her with upraised trowel.

MISTER MILLER

Stay madam,
In a garden close,
There is repose.

Stay madam,
All round we can see
Activity
From root and seed.
I now must plead
That you should heed
Your woman's need
Of quiet.
A diet
More inclined
To my mind.

He majestically waves her back step by step away from his cherished Glasshouse.

Pray madam
Is a woman's task
With the bizarre?
Nay madam,
In megethlin cask
No strange herbs are,
But homely flowers
From garden bowers,
All sweets, no sours,
Give up their powers.
Such as you,
Herbs should brew.
So your mind
Was designed.

He sits on the exact centre of the seat, still holding his flower and trowel up-raised stiffly.

Mrs. Blackwell droops in a chastened way on the right.

Madam!
Imagination leads
Your mind astray.
Madam!
A curious fancy feeds
In dangerous way.
Excited, it
Won't care a bit
At home to sit
And sew and knit
But will out
And about.
Curious Eve
Much did grieve.

MRS. BLACKWELL

recovering her determination and facing him with great persuasiveness.

Sir, no woman's heart could harden
In the Chelsea Physick garden.
Never vagrant mind could flit
Where in such sweet order, sit
Herb and bush and plant and tree
As arranged in Botany.

Yet the warbling birds that fly
To the clouds direct our eye,
As they rise from Iris bud,
From the handle of your spud,
From yon spike of asphodel,
And our thoughts fly up, as well.

First of stomach do we think,
Brewing draughts of herbs to drink;
Then to nose, our thoughts ascend

When the flowers' perfumes blend;
Then the eye we next would please
With herbs, in embroideries.

MRS. BLACKWELL

rapidly taking off her hat and disclosing her neatly whitecapped head. She sticks one finger on the top, pointing down.

Ah but last sir, is the brain.
Surely great would be our gain
If instead of cards or rout
Women troubled to find out
Nature's curiosities.
We were meant to think on these.

And the pain within our breast
Dulls, as knowledge gains in zest.
Aching hearts find some release
Wonder makes our tears to cease.
Lifted from the earth are we.
Divine curiosity!

She gradually elevates on tiptoes, her hands, spread out on either side, her head and eyes turned up ecstatically.

MISTER MILLER

Divine in man, but not in woman.
Her curiosity's but human.
A female can but stand and stare.
Not her's to find out why things are.

MRS. BLACKWELL

(*subsiding submissively*).

Had I great Mister Miller's brain,
A deeper knowledge I might gain,
Yet does not Providence impart
Some wisdom to a woman's heart?

Although her mind may be perplexed
With Latin names: and she be vexed
Through ignorance of botany,
She still has sensibility.

And sensible she is of good
And sensibly she doth intrude
On Nature's beauteous mystery.
I pray you, shew the banyan tree!

MISTER MILLER

True, madam, sensibility
Is not for man, too wise is he.
Man never weeps, man never feels;
He asks that you should cook his meals,
Then, nourished, to his labor goes
While at his shirt, the female sews.
Why is she curious? Because
'Tis one of heaven's well-known laws,
That man to understand was meant,
But no *fe*male's intelligent.

MRS. BLACKWELL

No man is curious; or feels?
Oh sir, someone before you kneels
Who, on some points, is wise as you
And *such* harsh words, must prove untrue!

Why do I weep? Why do I raise
My hands to heaven in your praise?
Why sir, do I refuse to go?
The answer, sir, you do not know.

MISTER MILLER

It is indeed a mystery.

MRS. BLACKWELL

Oh sir, who am I? This poor she,
Prone at your feet in such a plight?

She has placed her arms before her on the ground, bending down in a woeful attitude.

MISTER MILLER

Upon the riddle, I've no light.
Within this Herbary, no miss
Nor madam interrupts our bliss.
None ever sought before to peep,
Much less around my feet to weep.
Who are you, I'd much like to know,
And I will too, before you go!

MRS. BLACKWELL.

(*meekly raising her eyes*).

I am not going.

MISTER MILLER

But you must.

MRS. BLACKWELL

going back on her heels to a sitting position and folding her hands in her lap.

Sir, I am rooted in the dust.

MISTER MILLER

Have you no female bashfulness?

MRS. BLACKWELL

(*tearfully*)

No. I'm a female in distress!

MISTER MILLER

(*bending down to examine the phenomenon*).

(*with his trowel, turns her head*).

There are tears in your eyes.

MRS. BLACKWELL

My grief to them flies.

MISTER MILLER

(*staring at her, puzzled*)

trowel under her chin)

You come here for Science?

MRS. BLACKWELL

(*using her handkerchief*)

My grief makes alliance.

MISTER MILLER

(*bending low to scrutinise her and thundering*)

There's a mystery here!

MRS. BLACKWELL

(*shrinking from him*)

You have guessed that? Oh dear!

MISTER MILLER

What here do I see?

MRS. BLACKWELL

(*pointing and rising in a sweeping curtsey*)

Curiosity,
As human
As woman's.

Mister Miller drops down to lowest platform, and remains, his back turned to her, breathing out his indignation. She plaits her fingers together and continues artlessly, standing on the right.

The reason why with brush I come,
To paint the Banyan in its home,
Is my poor husband.

(*She draws kerchief from her bosom and touches her eyes*)

MISTER MILLER

(*fiendishly sarcastic*)

Aha madam!
Never was Eve without an Adam!

MRS. BLACKWELL

No Adam he, no Eve am I,
Within the Fleet, sir, doth he lie.
His creditors have placed him there
In prison, to our great despair.
And so a Curious Herbal, I
Would make for curious folks to buy.

MISTER MILLER

(*jumping round as if electrified by the vulgar word 'buy'*)

Never, never shall you pass
To behold my house of glass.
What? You would make vulgar gain?
The mere thought excites a pain.
Traffic in soap and jelly
For eyes and nose and belly
But leave alone
The throne
Of Botany
And ME.

MRS. BLACKWELL

(*springs up, knee on bench*)

So! You would stay in groves Elysian
And leave my husband in his prison
Concerned in no way for his plight?
Sir, you are a most heartless wight

Why should mankind its belly stuff
With delicates as light as fluff
And not indulge in food for thought?
My Herbal should be widely bought.
From my intention I'll not swerve!
Who made those wonders you reserve?
Did you invent them? Did they grow
At your command? Not so, Sir. No.
They grow, they flower, give fruit and seed
Because of beauty all have need.

(*stamps ad lib through above*)

Here is my pencil. Here am I,
To limn them for all men to buy.

MISTER MILLER

(*stamping ad lib*)

Bold mistress, hence!
Such impudence
Was never known.
Those trees *I've* grown
They have waxed fair
Through *my* fond care,
Your pencil, pooh
Has naught to do
With work like mine.
The kitchen's thine.

(*he increases the stamps*)

MRS. BLACKWELL.

(*also stamping*)

I will not go
Though ever so
You scold and rate.

Pray let me state
(*The stamps subside*)
My husband's name
Once known to Fame.
A. Blackwell wrote
Boerhavë's note.
He was his scribe,
And now, . . . you jibe!
(*turns away with handkerchief*)

MISTER MILLER

Blackwell, I wist
A herbalist
Of whom I've read.
I thought him dead.

MRS. BLACKWELL

Nay sir he turned
From herbs and learned
The printer's trade
Your work to aid.

Miller turns to her, visibly startled.

Printed must be
Your dictionary
Of gardening.
He did that thing.
He worshipped you!
(*weeps away from him*)

MISTER MILLER

My printer true
Who so well wist
My crab-bed fist?

MRS. BLACKWELL

My fortune, I
Gave willingly.
But husband dear
Apprenticed ne'er
Had been: he taught
Himself and bought
A printing press
So, merciless
Was the whole Trade!
Vile plots they made!

Miller leaps into the air.

MRS. BLACKWELL

Our paper, they
Did take away.
For ink we paid.
It was delayed.
Then came more men
With bills, and then
To gaol he went
For work well meant.

MISTER MILLER

drawing out a spacious handkerchief with his back to her.

My heart you touch
Ma'am overmuch.
My printer friend
To have such end,
He served me well
Shall I repel
His tender spouse
From my glasshouse?

MRS. BLACKWELL

You feel, sir, you?

MISTER MILLER

in a paroxysm of remorse

Madam I do,
I feel for you!
Boo-hoo, hoo-hoo!

MRS. BLACKWELL

Rising with astonishing rapidity and slinging on her hat

Then sir before you con-duct me
To see the Famous Banyan Tree
My drawings I would like to show.
They are in this portfolio.

Oh brush, oh pencil, how you fail
When on sweet nature we'd regale,
And yet sir some have said to me
That I draw mighty carefully,
And do excel, some artists state,
When drawing on the copper plate.

He seats himself, she beside him.

Behold this bright nasturtium!
When it's exposed, the insects hum
Taking it for reality,
So simple is the honeybee!
And here's germander, nicely blue;
And here's a little clump of rue
Which grew upon my window-sill,
I trust you find them not so ill?

MISTER MILLER

Delightful! Taken to the life!
Madam, I see more than a wife,
I see an artist of great skill.
I beg you, draw what trees you will.

MRS. BLACKWELL

What sir, I have intelligence?

MISTER MILLER

gallantly presenting flower

Too much, madam, to take offence.
So to the Glasshouse let us go
And see what novelties there blow.

He rises and hands her up, keeping the portfolio.

MRS. BLACKWELL

Oh noble Prince of Gardeners
That such a blessing kind confers,
With Doctor Isaac Rand I came
And said I'd wait here for the same
As advised. Here he is!
How surprised!

Doctor Rand enters Right, reading his little book. Beholds Mrs. Blackwell on Mister Miller's arm and throws up his hands, amazed. As he enters

MRS. BLACKWELL

(*calling*)

Doctor Rand!

MISTER MILLER

He will quiz!

(*discomfited aside*)

MRS. BLACKWELL.

Here I stand
Underneath the hawthorn tree
As you have ad-vi-sed me,
But kind Mister Miller here
Now will lead me to his sphere

He hands her across, Left

Where in regions of pure light
Of his trees I shall have sight!

DOCTOR RAND

Then madam of me
You no longer have need.

MRS. BLACKWELL.

Oh pray forgive *me*
That I tripped with such speed.
Curiosity tempts us
To fly to the Tree,
But nothing exempts us
From ci-vil-i-tee.

Miller hands her back and she curtseys to Rand. She then stands beneath the tree, between the two men.

When kind Mister Miller
Extended his hand,
I thought of the siller,
Such drawings I've planned.

My Curious Herbal
Dear sirs, I must sell!

She holds up her hands, pathetically yet triumphant. The men take off their hats, and go down on one knee on either side of her.

DOCTOR RAND and MISTER MILLER

We are *quite* agreeable,
Dear Missis Black-*well*!

The curtain descends on the little china group, immovable. Mrs. Blackwell smiling a mild sweet doll-like smile.

ARTHUR'S PRES

from which it was borrowed.

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